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## The salience of socially engaging and disengaging emotions among Black and White South Africans

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This study investigated the experience of disengaging and engaging emotions among Black and White South African university students. In total 351 Black and White students attending a large North Western province university in South Africa (45% Black students, 69% female students,  $M_{age} = 21.09$ ,  $SD_{age} = 3.02$ ) reported on their emotions in general, on the last emotional experience they had at home, and on the last emotional experience they had at university. They rated in each context 55 emotion terms that represented the emotion domain. Participants could either respond in English, Setswana, or Afrikaans. A multidimensional scaling revealed a two-dimensional structure across Blacks and Whites, the three languages, and the three contexts. On the first dimension negative emotions (such as sadness) were opposed to positive emotions (such as joy). On the second dimension disengaging emotions (such as anger and pride) were opposed to engaging emotions (such as guilt and compassion). Thus also in South Africa emotions differ with respect to whether they set a person apart from the social context (disengaging), or whether they link a person to the social context (engaging). Contrary to expectation, Blacks did not report more engaging and less disengaging emotions than Whites. In the university context no differences were observed, while in the home and general context Blacks reported more disengaging and less engaging emotions than Whites. Post hoc explanations are proposed in terms of relative differences in social status, acculturative changes, and the specific experiences of Black and White students in the South-African context.

**Keywords:** Engaging emotions, disengaging emotions, independent self, interdependent self, acculturation

### Introduction

In the cross-cultural emotion literature an important distinction has been proposed between socially engaging and disengaging emotions (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006). It is theorised that emotions not only have to be differentiated with respect to their positive or negative valence, but also according to how an individual relates to the social environment. During an emotion, a person can experience the self as embedded in a network of social relationships with others or can experience the self as a bounded entity that is independent from others. In the former case the person engages and links up with others, while in the latter case the person is focused on the self and disengages from others. For example, respect and shame can be considered as typical engaging emotions, while pride and anger are typical disengaging emotions. When people experience respect, their attitude and feeling may arise from a cultural model that recognises people's dignity, deservingness, acknowledgement, and entitlement (e.g., de Cremer, 2002; Heuer, Blumenthal, Douglas, & Weinblatt, 1999). In shame, people see themselves through the eyes of others, and they become painfully aware of social norms and expectations (e.g., Scheff, 2003). Pride is experienced following a positive evaluation of one's competence or effort in achieving a goal (e.g., Weiner, 1986). It is a pleasant feeling associated with self-achievement and autonomy (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2000). Anger elicits an aggressive action tendency aiming at defending the self and what is considered to belong to the self. Thus, anger confirms the self, but also threatens social harmony (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Markus, Kitayama, and colleagues have also hypothesised systematic differences between cultural groups in the salience of engaging and disengaging emotions (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Kitayama, et al., 2006). In line with the broad differentiation between individualistic and collectivistic cultural groups (e.g., Triandis, 1995), they have proposed that cultural groups differ with respect to how the self is construed. They propose a distinction between an independent and an interdependent self-construal. With an independent self-construal the person is seen as a self-contained, autonomous entity who comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g., traits, abilities, motives, and values) and behaves primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes. North American cultures, as well as most Western European cultures are assumed to be characterised by an independent self-construction (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, the interdependent self is defined in relation to others, such as family members and close friends, and the social context. The interdependent self is assumed to characterise collectivistic non-Western societies, such as East-Asian, Latin American, and African societies (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rhee, Uleman, Roman, & Lee, 1995). In cultural groups where the self is constructed in terms of relationships with others, engaging emotions are predicted to be more salient as they link up the person to the social context. On the contrary, in cultural groups where the self is seen as a bounded entity, disengaging emotions would be more salient as they confirm the independence and autonomy of the person.

Most research on engaging and disengaging emotions has been done by comparing the United States and East Asian countries (e.g., Kitayama, et al., 2006; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Very little research has been done on emotional experiences among cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, or in South Africa. The current paper investigates whether in a South African context the distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions also emerges in daily emotional experiences and whether Blacks and Whites in South Africa differ with respect to the salience of these emotions.

### **Distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions**

It can be assumed that Markus and Kitayama (1991) have identified a major type of variation in the emotion domain that is relevant across cultural groups. Cross-cultural empirical value research with the Schwartz value survey has demonstrated that the distinction between self-focused values and other-focused values is a distinction that universally emerges across cultural groups (Fontaine, Poortinga, Delbeke, & Schwartz, 2008). Thus, within cultural groups across the world, people differ from one another in their relative preference for values that are self- or other-focused. Therefore we can expect that individual differences in the salience of engaging and disengaging emotions can also be identified universally. We thus predict that the distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions will be a relevant distinction for both Blacks and Whites in South Africa.

### **Differences between Blacks and Whites in the salience of engaging and disengaging emotions**

The humanistic concept of Ubuntu, which historically developed within Black South African communities, places a high value on the cultural belief that “a human being is a human being because of other human beings”. Ubuntu describes the individual in terms of their several relationships with others. Nolte-Schamm (2006) further explained Ubuntu as associated with social relatedness, peace, and harmony in a community-based environment, with respect for others, tolerance, compassion, and sensitivity towards the elderly, being obedient towards adults, parents, and authority. The concept of Ubuntu closely resembles the definition of an interdependent self-construction as proposed by Markus and Kitayama (1991).

The majority of White South Africans share a historical heritage rooted in Protestantism. Protestantism promotes self-reliance and pursuit of personal interest (e.g., Inglehart, 1997) and has been related to a work ethic that is characterised by pride in work, need for achievement, honesty, and internal locus of control (e.g., Furnham, 1990). All these characteristics of Protestantism match those of individualism, and an independent construction of the self.

In line with the different cultural heritage of Blacks and Whites in South Africa, Eaton and Louw (2000) observed that Black students spontaneously reported more interdependent self-descriptions and White students reported more independent self-constructions. Therefore, it can be expected that Black South Africans will experience

more engaging emotions that confirm their interdependent self-construction and that Whites will experience more disengaging emotions in line with their independent self-construction.

### **The impact of context on the differences between Blacks and Whites**

While Blacks and Whites have historically very different cultural roots, they have also been in close cultural contact for a very long time. Especially since the change from apartheid to democracy there have been a lot more intercultural learning experiences than ever before. This intercultural contact is likely to have led to a process of acculturation in which cultural and psychological changes emerged in both groups (e.g., Sam & Berry, 2010). It has also been demonstrated that the acculturation process is context-dependent. Which acculturation orientation is preferred depends on whether one looks at a private or a public domain. For instance, Turkish-Dutch preferred adaptation to Dutch culture more in the public context than in the private context, while cultural maintenance was more important in the private context (e.g., Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver, 2003).

The distinction between the private and the public context of functioning is highly relevant in a South African context. In the private context most social contacts happen within one's own ethno-cultural group, while the intergroup contact predominantly happens in the public context. Therefore, we can expect that Black and White differences in engaging and disengaging emotions will be more salient in the private context than in the public context with Blacks especially reporting more engaging emotions at home as compared to Whites.

To summarise, the three hypotheses of the current study were:

- Hypothesis 1: In the emotion domain a distinction can be identified between engaging and disengaging emotions for both Blacks and Whites in South Africa.
- Hypothesis 2: Blacks have more engaging emotions and Whites have more disengaging emotions.
- Hypothesis 3: The differences between Blacks and Whites will be more pronounced in the private than in the public context. Thus, especially in the private context Blacks will report more engaging emotions and Whites will report more disengaging emotions.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were a convenience sample of 351 Black and White undergraduate students from the North-West University in South Africa (45% Black students, 69% female students,  $M_{age} = 21.09$ ,  $SD_{age} = 3.02$ ) that participated either in English (76 Black participants and 62 White participants), in Setswana (76 Black participants), or in Afrikaans (131 White participants) (see Table 1 for detailed participant demographics for each of the four subgroups). Virtually, all participants were Bachelor's students (95%), with only a few participants studying at honours and masters level. Most students attended courses in the faculty of Commerce and Administration and in the faculty of Human and Social Sciences.

**Table 1:** Demographic information of the four groups

Group	<i>N</i>	% <sub>women</sub>	<i>M</i> <sub>age</sub>	<i>SD</i> <sub>age</sub>
Black Setswana	76	74.1	22.51	5.23
Black English	82	65.8	20.71	2.56
White Afrikaans	131	71.0	20.68	1.60
White English	62	66.7	20.77	1.42

### Measures

Participants first reported on demographics, including language, educational level, and race. Then they completed a newly constructed instrument to assess their emotional experiences in three different contexts. The participants were asked to report on their emotions in general, on the last emotional episode they experienced at home and on the last emotional episode they experienced at university. For each of these three contexts they were asked to rate 55 emotion and feeling items that represent the emotion domain. Emotion items were taken from the emotional patterns questionnaire, which was developed to assess engaging and disengaging emotions (De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2011). Moreover, to guarantee that the emotion items represented the emotion domain well for both White and Black African participants, emotion terms were added from two Master's theses that investigated the emotion lexicon in Afrikaans (Van der Merwe, 2011) and in Setswana (Mojaki, 2011). The instructions were "Please indicate for each of these feelings whether you agree that they describe how you feel in general/what you felt in the emotional situation at home/what you felt in the emotional situation at university". They rated each emotion item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). English, Setswana, and Afrikaans versions of the questionnaires were developed using translation-back-translation and committee approach methods.

### Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by Ghent University, Belgium. Participants could choose in which language they answered the questionnaires. Of the Black participants 82 chose English and 76 chose Setswana. Of the White students, 62 chose English and 131 chose Afrikaans. The research instrument was administered to each participant in a classroom setting. After consent forms were collected from the participants, the emotion questionnaire was administered. Students participated freely and received 2% course credit for their research practical. Participants were assured both verbally and in writing that their names and student numbers which were used for identification were kept separate from the main questionnaire to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

### Results

#### *Engaging and disengaging emotions in the emotion domain*

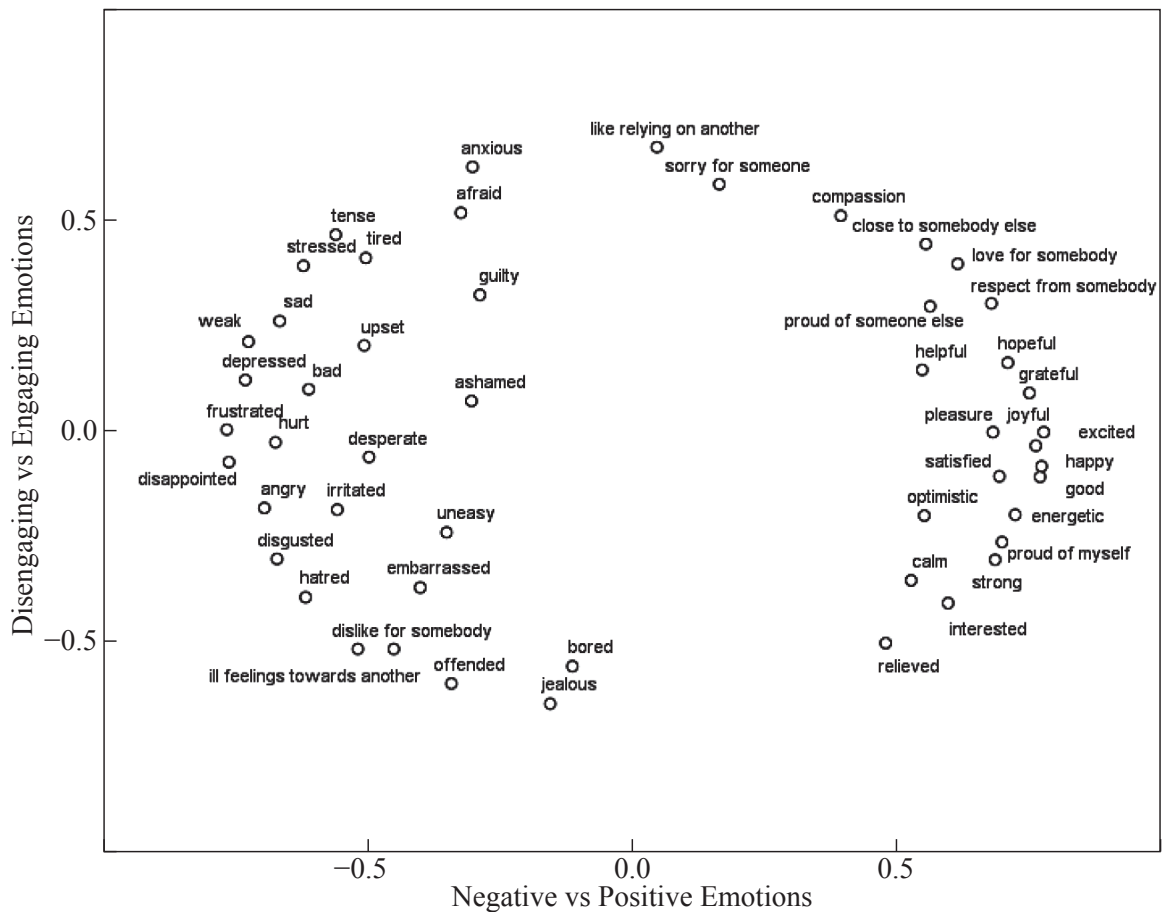
A replicated multidimensional scaling (MDS) was conducted. MDS represents psychological differences between emotion terms as distances between points in a geometrical space, such that large similarities are represented by small distances in the spatial representation (Borg & Groenen, 1997). Four groups

(Black Setswana-speaking group, Black English-speaking group, White Afrikaans-speaking group, and White English-speaking group) by three contexts (general, home and university) yielded 12 conditions. The structure was computed across these 12 conditions. To control for differences in acquiescence, the mean was subtracted from the observed scores per condition per person (centring) before the analyses. A two-dimensional structure represented the data across the 12 conditions very well. The fit measure ("dispersion accounted for" which can range from 0 to 1) was 0.93. However, an inspection at item level revealed that a few of the 55 terms were not stable between the 12 conditions (referring to the different contexts, languages, and ethnic groups). These terms were removed in a stepwise method (i.e., when the average normalised stress for the removed items was larger than 0.10). Five terms were removed in this way: worthlessness, gloomy, indebted, resigned, and surprise. Dispersion accounted for of the two-dimensional representation of the remaining 50 items was 0.94. The first dimension distinguished between positive and negative emotions. As predicted, the second dimension clearly distinguished between engaging and disengaging emotions (see Figure 1). On this second dimension, positive emotion terms such as "proud on myself" and "love for somebody" were opposed to one another, as well as negative emotion terms such as "dislike for somebody" and "guilty".

Based on the results of the MDS, two scales were constructed, one for the negative vs. positive emotion dimension and one for the disengaging vs. engaging emotion dimension. In a first step a separate scale was constructed for each of the four quadrants of the emotion domain. Thus, a scale was constructed for the positive engaging, the negative engaging, the positive disengaging, and the negative disengaging quadrant. Those terms which had coordinates between -0.25 and 0.25 on either dimension in the MDS were dropped. We thus only used those items that clearly differentiated between the four quadrants. Based on these four scales, we computed a score for the negative vs. positive emotion dimension by averaging the positive engaging and disengaging scale scores and the reversed negative engaging and disengaging scale scores. The reliability of this new negative vs. positive emotion scale was 0.93 on average across Blacks and Whites, contexts, and languages. We also computed a score for the disengaging vs. engaging emotion dimension by averaging the positive and negative engaging scale scores and the reversed positive and negative disengaging scale scores. The reliability of this new scale was 0.66 on average across Blacks and Whites, contexts, and languages.

#### *Differences between Blacks and Whites in the salience of negative vs. positive and disengaging vs. engaging emotions*

Two repeated measurements ANOVAs were executed with the four ethnolinguistic groups being the between factor (Black English, Black Setswana, White English, and White Afrikaans), the three contexts being the within factor (general, home, university) and negative vs. positive emotions and disengaging vs. engaging emotions being the dependent variable respectively.



**Figure 1.** Two Dimensional Representation of Emotions.

#### *Group differences in negative vs. positive emotions*

All three effects in the ANOVA analysis were significant. The four ethnolinguistic groups differed significantly from one another [ $F(3, 347) = 8.60, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.069$ ]. The three contexts differed significantly from one another [ $\Lambda = 0.677, F(2, 346) = 82.367, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.323$ ]. The interaction between the ethnolinguistic groups and the contexts was small, but significant [ $\Lambda = 0.957, F(6, 692) = 2.579, p = 0.018, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.022$ ]. As can be seen in Figure 2, positive emotions are reported most in the general context, less in the home context, and least in the university context. One clear deviation is observed between the ethnolinguistic groups for one context: The Black Setswana group reported more positive emotions in the university context than the other three groups. Post hoc Tuckey pairwise comparison tests at an alpha level of 0.05 within each of the contexts indeed confirmed that only in the university context the Black Setswana group reported significantly more positive emotions than each of the other three groups. In the other two contexts, the differences were either not significant (home context) or small (with only the Black Setswana group reporting significantly more positively emotions than the White Afrikaans group, but the other groups did not differ significantly from one another).

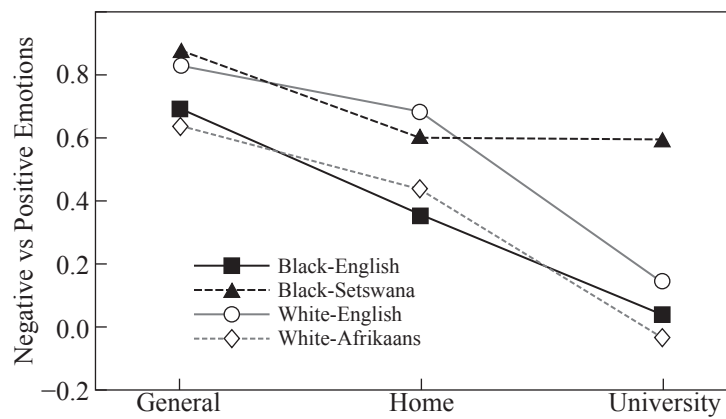
#### *Group differences in disengaging vs. engaging emotions*

All three effects in the ANOVA analysis were significant. The four ethnolinguistic groups differed significantly

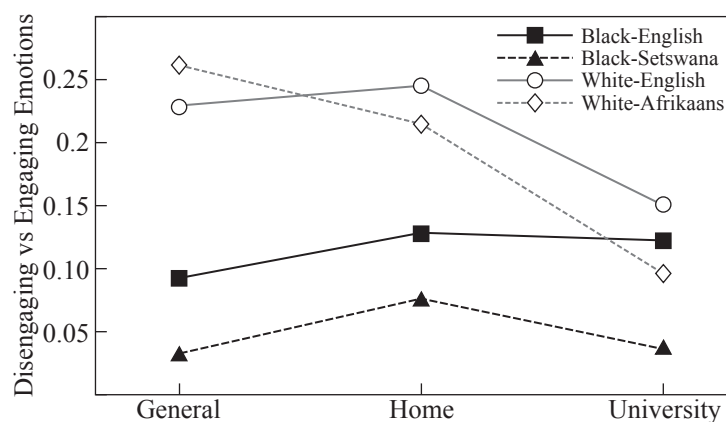
from one another [ $F(3, 347) = 8.65, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.070$ ]. The overall difference between the three groups was small, but significant [ $\Lambda = 0.979, F(2, 346) = 3.72, p = 0.025, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.021$ ]. The interaction between the ethnolinguistic groups and the contexts was also small, but significant [ $\Lambda = 0.957, F(6, 692) = 2.579, p = 0.018, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.022$ ]. A further investigation of the pairwise differences between the four groups within each of the contexts with a Tuckey test at an alpha level of 0.05 revealed that in the general context the two Black groups reported significantly less engaging emotions than two White groups, that in the home context only the Black Setswana group reported significantly less engaging emotions than the White English group, and that in the university context the four groups did not differ significantly from one another (see Figure 3).

#### **Discussion**

We first studied the internal structure of the emotion domain for Blacks and Whites across three contexts and three languages. With a new instrument that was carefully constructed to represent the whole emotion domain a two-dimensional structure clearly emerged in both groups. The first dimension represented a valence dimension, which is typically found in emotion research (e.g., Fontaine, 2013; Russell, 1991). The second dimension clearly confirmed the distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions as expected by Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994). On this dimension, emotions that either strengthen



**Figure 2.** Effect of group and context on negative vs. positive emotions.



**Figure 3.** Effect of group and context on disengaging vs. engaging emotions

interpersonal relationships (such as compassion and guilt) are opposed to emotions that set the person apart from the social group (such as pride and anger). The emergence of this second dimension thus clearly confirms the social nature of emotions. Emotions are not only pleasant or unpleasant, but also imply very different ways of relating to the social environment.

While a basic distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions in the emotion domain was confirmed, we could not confirm the predicted differences between Blacks and Whites in the salience of these emotions. On the contrary, rather than observing that Blacks experience more engaging emotions and Whites experience more disengaging emotions, we observed the reverse in the general context, and to some extent also in the home context, while no differences were observed in the university context. A possible explanation is that there has been a shift in the direction of an independent self-construal among Black students. Mpofo (1994) has for instance found that Zimbabwean students had an individualist self-concept orientation. It could thus be the case that the self-construal of White and Black students has become very comparable, leading to comparable emotions in the university context. Moreover, having an independent self-construal in an interdependent cultural context possibly leads to the experience of even more disengaging emotions, as one experiences more conflict with the social environment.

Another possible post hoc explanation can be sought in relative differences in social status. The experience of engaging versus disengaging emotions has not only been linked to self-construal, but also to social status. It has already been shown in the literature that people with high social status express more pride (e.g., Tracy, Shariff, Zhao, Henrich, 2013) and that anger is more recognised in higher social status persons (e.g., Ratcliff, Franklin, Nelson, & Vescio, 2012). There is also empirical evidence that low social status is related to the experience of more shame, depression and anxiety (e.g., Guilbert, 2000). Thus, high social status is related to the experience of disengaging emotions, and low social status to the experience of engaging emotions. It is possible that Black and White students differ with respect to their relative social status. According to the official General Household Survey Statistics (2013), White students make up 22.3% of the total student population, while Black students make up 66.4% of the student population. However, in the general South African population Whites make up only 8.4% and Blacks 80.2% of the total population (South African Statistics, 2014). So one is much more likely to become a student as a White young adult than as a Black young adult. While Black and White students share a comparable social status at university, it can be expected that Black students enjoy a higher social status within the Black community than White students do within the White community. It is a more difficult position to achieve for Black than for White

students. Such differences in social status could then lead to the experience of more disengaging emotions for Blacks than for Whites outside the university context.

The strongest effect that we observed was the effect of the context on the experience of negative and positive emotions. Positive emotions were reported most in the general condition, and more positive emotions were reported in the home than in the university context. The general condition clearly differs from the home and the university condition, as only in the home and the university condition were participants asked to rate specific emotional episodes. Possibly, there is a bias towards reporting negative emotional episodes when asked about concrete emotional experiences, as they deviate most from how one typically feels. Such negativity bias can already be observed in the emotion lexicon both in cross-cultural research as in research in South Africa. It is a robust finding that there are many more negative emotion terms than positive emotion terms in emotion lexicons across the world (e.g., Fontaine, 2013; Van der Merwe, 2011; Mojaki, 2011; Russell, 1991). The fact that less positive experiences are reported in the university context compared to the home context, most probably has to be explained by the stressfulness of university life. Both in Western (e.g., Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014) and in African studies (e.g., Malinga-Musamba, 2014) it has been observed that the university context is a stressful context where young adults have to take up new roles and at the same time are under pressure to perform well.

The third hypothesis, that context would operate as an amplifier of the differences between Black and Whites with the differences being smaller in the university than in the home context was not confirmed. While there were significant differences between Black and Whites in the home context, but not in the university context with respect to disengaging vs. engaging emotions, the reverse was observed for negative vs. positive emotions. In the latter case, there were no differences in the home context, but a significant difference was observed in the university context with the Black Setswana group reporting more positive emotions than the other three groups. One possible explanation is that the Setswana-speaking group came almost exclusively from a smaller campus in the North West province with predominantly Setswana-speaking students. Possibly, the transition from secondary school to university is less stressful for Setswana-speaking students at such a campus as the academic environment is more familiar and possibly also fosters more social relationships among students, which is known to be a protective factor against the stressfulness of university life (e.g., Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014).

The fact that emotional experiences have been studied in different contexts and with different languages with a representative sample of emotion terms are strengths of the current study. There are, however, also two clear limitations. First, there was no direct measurement of self-construal. For future research it will be very important to directly assess the self-construal of the students in order to investigate whether observed differences in emotions are due to a change in self-construal among Black South African students, or have to be explained by other broad dimensions, such as social status,

or specific context factors, such as studying in a nearby more familiar academic environment. A second important limitation is that only student samples were studied. Students are not representative of the population, and this is even less the case for Black students. They are probably the most Westernised subgroup in the Black population with the most exposure to Western culture. It would be interesting in the future, to also study non-student samples that are more representative of the Tswana society in North West province.

## Conclusion

The current study has demonstrated that the distinction between engaging and disengaging emotions is an important distinction in the emotion domain for both Blacks and Whites in South Africa. However, no evidence was found for the expectation that Blacks would experience more engaging and the Whites would experience more disengaging emotions. The current research has generated a number of possible alternative hypotheses for the observed findings, ranging from acculturation of Black students to a Western individualistic culture, over relative differences in social status between Black and White students, to very specific context effects such as the size and ethnic composition of the university campus. This study demonstrates that well established models in cross-cultural psychology cannot just be assumed to simply generalise to an African context. Future research is needed to reveal the precise ways in which culture shapes people's emotional lives. The links between culture and emotions are more complex than the current literature acknowledges.

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